

The question of All Saints Woodham and services of same-sex blessings.

Paper to 14 March 2024 PCC from Adrian Vincent.

The January 2024 PCC meeting had the Agenda item “LLF update”. No paper was provided and no motion was on the Agenda. It came as a surprise when at the meeting Fr Roland proposed that the PCC vote on services of blessing for those in same-sex relationships. I argued that this was premature as matters were still going through General Synod and I asked for it to be discussed at the March meeting instead. I am grateful that the PCC agreed to give it more time. The minutes of the meeting record:

“LLF Update (Living in Love & Faith)

RO informed the PCC that in November General Synod had agreed the wording for prayers for the blessing of the union of a same sex couple. This is a matter of conscience for individual priests as to whether they wish to use these prayers. RO is comfortable to use these prayers of blessing. However, every incumbent must facilitate the use of them in their church if requested. As a PCC we have to decide whether we will allow the use of these prayers in a regular church service as well as a separate dedicated blessing service.

After some discussion it was decided that a vote on this matter will be deferred to the next meeting, by which time PCC members are to look at the prayers and guidance online and by then there may be more detailed guidance published from the Church of England.

This will be placed on the Agenda for the March meeting.

Action: TW”

My views

My views are on the issues of principle, they are not directed at any individuals. In the decade or so that I have been attending All Saints I have never expressed disapproval of the relationship status of any member of the congregation. I am very well aware of my own sinful nature, my wrong thoughts and actions. I do not consider myself better than anyone else – rather the opposite.

My reading of the Bible is that:

- I agree with Inclusive Church, that we should be: “a Church which welcomes and serves all people in the name of Jesus Christ”.
- I agree with the ordination of women as deacons. Romans 16:1, Phoebe was a deacon.
- I agree with women deacons becoming archdeacons. (The Diocese of Chichester has several ‘permanent’ women deacons, who disagree with the ordination of women as priests. In 2012 the Diocese put forward a General Synod motion, to enable women deacons to become archdeacons, without having to be priests.¹ The liberal majority on General Synod voted this down, preventing traditionalist women from being promoted).
- I do not agree with the ordination of women as priests and bishops. Jesus chose 12 male apostles.
- I believe that sexual intercourse should only be between a man and a woman in marriage. Genesis 2:24.

¹ https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-01/gs-1846a_july11.pdf

All Saints has had 11 vicars so far. I believe that the first seven vicars were the same as mine, that everyone is welcome at All Saints, and that the priesthood should be reserved to men, and that sexual intercourse should be reserved to a man and a woman in marriage.

More recent vicars have moved from that traditional view. Those who didn't vote for Brexit hope that one day the country will come to realise that leaving the EU was a mistake and will vote to return. So, I hope that one day, All Saints will return to the more traditional theological path of its first seven vicars.

The General Synod processes

The General Synod is the Church's parliament and people are elected for a five-year term (six-year term during Covid). I was a member of General Synod from 2010-2015. I was a candidate in the 2015 and 2021 elections.

The last three General Synod elections have been called "one issue elections" where the various tribes within the C of E have tried to get enough of their own candidates elected to either introduce a change on the topic or resist the change. In the 2010 election the big issue was women bishops. In the 2015 and 2021 elections it was sex.

For the General Synod to pass church legislation, in day-to-day matters the voting threshold to pass the legislation a 50% majority is needed. If the legislation involves a change in doctrine or liturgy a two-thirds majority is needed. This is called Article 7 or Article 8 Business - referring to the General Synod's Constitution. Article 7:

"A provision touching doctrinal formulae or the services or ceremonies of the Church of England or the administration of the sacraments or sacred rites thereof.."

The 2015 election results had fewer than two-thirds of members wanting to change Church teaching on sexual ethics. There was therefore a stand-off between those pushing for change, but without enough votes to do it, and those who wanted no change in doctrine. The way forward therefore was the Living in Love and Faith (LLF) process. This included the publication of the "*Living in Love & Faith*" book and videos in 2020.

I wrote at the time:

"The Living in Love & Faith process seeks to get away from the stalemate situation in the Church of England of rival camps, one camp trying to push for change, the other camp trying to keep the current doctrine. The idea is to put down our weapons and discuss these matters with no preconceived agenda, learning from each other. It is an excellent project.

However, this truce will not last forever. It seems inevitable that in the next couple of years motions will be put down in General Synod to change the Church of England's doctrine and practice in this area. The power struggles will then restart, whether it is fighting to retain the traditional church doctrine; or to change it; or fighting to have an 'agree to differ' approach of two doctrines."²

² <https://adrianvincent.org.uk/living-in-love-faith/>

The LLF process didn't result in many people changing their minds on the issue. My theory is that a reconciliation process of sharing and listening is suitable for resolving a dispute between people, but doesn't work for finding out the meaning of certain Bible passages.

The outcome of the 2021 General Synod election was, again, that more than one third of those elected were on the traditionalist/evangelical wing. They breathed a sigh of relief because this meant that there could be no change to doctrine/liturgy because those who wanted change did not have a two-thirds majority. It therefore came as a shock when the House of Bishops proposed a liturgy for same-sex blessings and said that only a 50% majority would be needed to pass it, because they said that a liturgy for same-sex blessings does not involve change of liturgy or doctrine.

The Bishops have been threatened with a legal challenge on that point. The Bishops' response has been to "seek a commitment to avoid using the civil courts to settle our disputes."³

February 2023 General Synod

The Business Done⁴ document on the CofE website records the General Synod motion that was passed:

“That this Synod, recognising the commitment to learning and deep listening to God and to each other of the Living in Love and Faith process, and desiring with God's help to journey together while acknowledging the different deeply held convictions within the Church:

- a) lament and repent of the failure of the Church to be welcoming to LGBTQI+ people and the harm that LGBTQI+ people have experienced and continue to experience in the life of the Church;
- b) recommit to our shared witness to God's love for and acceptance of every person by continuing to embed the Pastoral Principles in our life together locally and nationally;
- c) commend the continued learning together enabled by the Living in Love and Faith process and resources in relation to identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage;
- d) welcome the decision of the House of Bishops to replace Issues in Human Sexuality with new pastoral guidance;
- e) welcome the response from the College of Bishops and look forward to the House of Bishops further refining, commending and issuing the Prayers of Love and Faith described in GS 2289 and its Annexes;
- f) invite the House of Bishops to monitor the Church's use of and response to the Prayers of Love and Faith, once they have been commended and published, and to report back to Synod in five years' time.'
- g) endorse the decision of the College and House of Bishops not to propose any change to the doctrine of marriage, and their intention that the final version of the Prayers of Love and Faith should not be contrary to or indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England.'

was carried after a counted vote by Houses. The voting was as follows:

³ Page 4 of GS 2346 <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/gs-2346-llf-synod-paper-feb-2024.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/consolidated-business-done-february-2023-v2.pdf>

	FOR	AGAINST
Bishops	36	4
Clergy	111	85
Laity	103	92”

So, the approval for the draft prayers was more than 50% but less than two-thirds. The motion included the statement “not to propose any change to the doctrine of marriage”.

November 2023 General Synod

The Business Done⁵ document records that this motion was passed:

“ ‘That this Synod, conscious that the Church is not of one mind on the issues raised by Living in Love and Faith, that we are in a period of uncertainty, and that many in the Church on all sides are being deeply hurt at this time, recognise the progress made by the House of Bishops towards implementing the motion on Living in Love and Faith passed by this Synod in February 2023, as reported in GS 2328, encourage the House to continue its work of implementation, and ask the House to consider whether some standalone services for same-sex couples could be made available for use, possibly on a trial basis, on the timescale envisaged by the motion passed by the Synod in February 2023.’

was carried following a counted vote by Houses. The voting was as follows:

	IN FAVOUR	AGAINST
Bishops	23	10
Clergy	100	93
Laity	104	100”

Again, there was not a two-thirds majority.

December 2023 House of Bishops meeting

The House of Bishops at their meeting on 12 December voted to issue the Prayers of Love and Faith and the Prayers for a Covenanted Friendship. The Press Release stated:⁶

“[...] A selection of readings and prayers of thanksgiving, dedication and asking for God’s blessing for same-sex couples can be used in Church of England services for the first time from Sunday, December 17, following approval by the House of Bishops.

The final texts of Prayers of Love and Faith, commended for use in regular public worship or private prayer, are published today, together with pastoral guidance which sets out how they could be used.

[...] The Prayers can be used in regular scheduled services, such as a Sunday Eucharist or Evensong.

The House also continued to discuss separate proposals for special standalone services for same-sex couples to be formally authorised under canon law.

[...] The House agreed by 24 votes to 11, with three abstentions, in favour of a motion (see full text below) to make the Prayers of Love and Faith resources available with

⁵ https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/consolidated-business-done_0.pdf

⁶ <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/prayers-love-and-faith-be-made-available-use-sunday>

effect from December 17. Bishops also approved a motion to commend the Prayers for a Covenanted Friendship from the same date by 30 votes to six, with two abstentions. They are published together with the Prayers of Love and Faith resources. [...] The final texts are available both as a downloadable resource and as text on the Church of England website. [...]"

The text of the Prayers⁷ and the Pastoral Guidance⁸ were published on the CofE website.

February 2024 General Synod

The Bishops' paper "*Living in Love, Faith, and Reconciliation. GS 2346*"⁹ was debated. It never got to be voted on because the General Synod voted to move to Next Business. So, whilst the paper was not approved by Synod, it is the best information we have as to the current situation and what might happen next.

i.) Prayers for a same-sex couple within an ordinary church service.

These were issued in December 2023 and can be used by churches now within an existing service.

ii.) Standalone services for a same-sex couple.

The November 2023 General Synod had asked "...the House to consider whether some standalone services for same-sex couples could be made available for use, possibly on a trial basis...". GS 2346 sets out various options for doing this. Their preferred option seems to be to first issue standalone services for an experimental period under Canon B5A, and then seek formal approval of them under Canon B2. The Canons of the CofE are on the CofE website.¹⁰ Canon B5A says:

"B 5A Of authorization of forms of service for experimental periods
1. Where a form of service has been prepared with a view to its submission to the General Synod for approval by the Synod under Canon B 2 the archbishops after consultation with the House of Bishops of the General Synod may, prior to that submission, authorize such form of service for experimental use for a period specified by them on such terms and in such places or parishes as they may designate."

Page 9 of GS 2346 sets out how the experiment process of Canon B5A might be done:

"The process involves a number of steps:
i. The archbishops would formally publish the form of service, specifying the dates when the authorisation for experimental use will begin and end;
ii. The archbishops would then invite the minister of a parish who holds the cure of souls of a parish and who has the support of the PCC to apply by a specified date several weeks before the start of the experimental period to be designated as a parish where the form of service may be used.

⁷ <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/prayers-of-love-and-faith.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/living-in-love-and-faith-pastoral-guidance.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/gs-2346-llf-synod-paper-feb-2024.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/legal-services/canons-church-england/canons-website-edition>

- iii. Before the start of the experimental period the archbishops would issue an instrument in writing designating certain parishes to be places where the form of service can be used. The archbishops could also state that they will consider designating additional parishes who apply during the experimental period.
- iv. During the period of experimental use, the form of service may be used by those parishes that have been designated. Feedback would be gathered to be submitted by a specified date.
- v. At the end of the experimental period the use of the form of service must cease.”

Then would come the process for permanent approval under Canon B2. The document sets out the 15 steps of that process, which concludes with:

“xv. Final Approval Stage – the business as returned by the House of Bishops is considered by the Synod on the motion that it “be finally approved”. Final Approval of liturgical business requires a majority of two-thirds of the members present and voting in each House. (The Synod has the option of referring the business back for further consideration by the House of Bishops instead of giving final approval.)”

A less than two-thirds majority of General Synod voted to have experimental standalone services of same-sex blessings. For those services to become permanent will require a two-thirds majority. The risk is that same-sex couples have standalone services for a couple of years of experimental period, and then the vote to make them permanent fails and the prayers will have to be withdrawn.

Synod members have been reminded that exactly the same thing happened on the women bishops legislation. Women bishops legislation had been drawn up without enough provision for traditionalists and the draft never got a two-thirds majority voting for it, but it kept getting a 50% majority to move it to the next stage. Then, at final approval stage in 2012 it failed to get the two-thirds majority needed. There was a huge outcry. New legislation was later drawn up that did have provision for traditionalists and that did get two-thirds majorities voting for it to move to the next stages and it did get the two-thirds final approval in 2014. Those who have been voting for the standalone services of same-sex blessing have been assuming that history will not repeat itself and that this will turn into a two-thirds majority at final approval stage. The Bishops’ February 2024 paper now proposes that the final vote on the Canon B2 procedure should be after the “next quinquennium”. i.e. after the next General Synod elections in 2026. Presumably in the hope that fewer evangelicals will be elected to General Synod in 2026 and that a two-thirds majority will be achieved that way. However, there is no evidence that the evangelical wing of the CofE is shrinking.

Regarding, All Saints, Woodham, if standalone services become an option on an experimental basis, if we were to sign up to be part of that experiment and provide those services to couples, we would need to be prepared to stop offering them if the two-thirds majority in Synod was not reached.

The Prayers

The *Prayers of Love and Faith* document¹¹ has two types of prayers offered. *Prayers for a Covenanted Friendship* (pages 1-2) which are not particularly controversial. And Prayers of Love and Faith (pages 3-22) which are controversial.

Prayers for a Covenanted Friendship

The notes on page 2 state:

“Covenanted friendships embody a type of relationship that is both committed and non-sexual, which is not exclusive, yet deeply meaningful, particular, and seeking to grow in holiness.
Covenanted friendships are relationships of an entirely different nature to marriage. Those who wish to seal a covenanted friendship may be of the same sex or opposite sexes. The friends may be married to other people, or unmarried. The friendship is by definition not sexually intimate. It will likely be expressed in practical forms of sharing aspects of life together.”

The Prayers include:

“The friends may say to one another:
N, I offer myself to you in love and friendship;
may these words be a seal of my trust and delight in you.
Where you go, I shall go:
I will seek to share your burdens and your joys.
I will pray that you will know God’s blessing
and walk with you wherever God calls us;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

These prayers of friendship are not particularly controversial.

Prayers of Love and Faith

The Prayers are not currently allowed to be used in standalone services. They have been approved for use within existing services. They have been passed by the Bishops under Canon B5:¹²

“B 5 Of the discretion of ministers in conduct of public prayer
1. The minister who is to conduct the service may in his discretion make and use variations which are not of substantial importance in any form of service authorized by Canon B 1 according to particular circumstances.
[...] 3. All variations in forms of service and all forms of service used under this Canon shall be reverent and seemly and shall be neither contrary to, nor indicative of any departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in any essential matter.”

¹¹ <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/prayers-of-love-and-faith.pdf>

¹² <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/legal-services/canons-church-england/canons-website-edition>

Canon B5 states that any prayers must not depart from the doctrine of the CofE. The doctrine of the CofE regarding marriage is in Canon B30:¹³

“B 30 Of Holy Matrimony

1. The Church of England affirms, according to our Lord's teaching, that marriage is in its nature a union permanent and lifelong, for better for worse, till death them do part, of one man with one woman, to the exclusion of all others on either side, for the procreation and nurture of children, for the hallowing and right direction of the natural instincts and affections, and for the mutual society, help and comfort which the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.”

The notes on page 3 of the Prayers state:

“The *Prayers of Love and Faith* are not a form of marriage service, nor do they equate the relationships brought before God to Holy Matrimony.”

But is that statement true?

Marriage is an exclusive, life-long relationship that creates a new family. These Prayers of Love and Faith mirror all these things and apply it to a same-sex couple:

Page 9: “give N and N wisdom and devotion
in the ordering of their life together.
May they dwell together in love and peace all the days of their life,”

Page 14: “that they may build a home of peace and welcome.”

Page 16: “we bring before you the family/children of N and N.
We thank you for the grace they have received from you,
and for the love and support they give.
May they receive the blessing
of your love as they support and cherish
N and N now and in the years to come.”

Page 16: “God of all grace and goodness,
we thank you for this new family,”

The recommended readings are also ones you would usually have in a marriage service, such as 1 Corinthians 13.

People have said, “if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it’s a duck”. In other words, whilst the notes state it is not a form of marriage service, it has all the ingredients of a marriage service, so that is what it is.

Suggestion to the PCC

My suggestion is that All Saints Woodham:

¹³ <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/legal-services/canons-church-england/canons-website-edition>

- i. does offer the *Prayers for Covenanted Friendships* – because they are in accordance with Church doctrine.
- ii. does not offer the *Prayers of Love and Faith* – because they contradict Church doctrine.

Disagreement amongst the PCC

Many on the PCC will disagree with me, and there will likely be a range of views.

On 13 December 2023, the day after the House of Bishops approved the text of the *Prayers of Love and Faith*, the Bishop of Guildford wrote an ‘Ad Clerum’ letter to all Clergy and Licensed Lay Ministers in the Diocese. As a churchwarden I do not receive these letters and they are not published on the Diocese of Guildford website, so I contacted the Communications Department and they sent me a copy. In the letter, Bishop Andrew writes:

“[...] the House of Bishops met yesterday morning, and decided by a majority vote to commend the Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF) for use within existing services [...] Some in the diocese will welcome this news, at least as a ‘step in the right direction’; while for others it will cause real anxiety and soul-searching. [...]

Whilst continuing to believe in the real strengths to be found in many a long-term, faithful same-sex relationship, I remain deeply concerned about the bishops’ decision to commend the prayers at this point, before publishing the completed pastoral guidance and pastoral reassurance required to bring the clarity and security we need; and am equally concerned at the lack of a strongly articulated legal and theological rationale behind what we’re doing and the way we’re doing it, not least because that could leave clergy on all sides vulnerable to challenge. [...]

- **On seeking the PCC’s agreement**, please would incumbents keen to use the PLF only do so following consultation with, and the agreement of, the PCC. Should there be a likelihood of significant division within a parish, please don’t introduce the PLF, and do feel free to cite me in support of that decision.
- **Where division does break out**, please consult the Area Dean at first instance and / or the Archdeacon.”

Adrian Vincent.
8 March 2024